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Join battle against poverty in Michigan

BY ISMAEL AHMED

No state has been hit harder by the national economic crisis than Michigan. We have lost hundreds of thousands of good-paying jobs. Our communities are dotted by thousands of foreclosed homes. And too many of our fellow citizens face the daily challenge of not having enough to eat.

More than 1.3 million people in our state receive a maximum of \$5.87 per day for food from the federal food stamp program -- just under \$2 per meal. Known in Michigan as the Food Assistance program, it is part of a safety net for such people as the woman I talked to a few weeks ago, a mother of four in the Upper Peninsula.

She works 70 hours a week and still isn't making enough to feed her family, so she supplements her budget with food stamps. More than a million people in Michigan will also visit a local food bank this year -- and the need is growing. In some parts of Michigan, emergency food providers are reporting 20%-25% increases in the number of people seeking help with food this year.

To better understand the hardship that a meager budget imposes on families, leaders from across Michigan are taking the "Food Stamp Challenge" the week of Oct. 13. This includes my wife, Margaret, and me, Grand Valley State University President Thomas Hass, United Way of Southeastern Michigan CEO Mike Brennan, Compuware Regional Vice President Bob Kennedy, and dozens of community, education, business and political leaders, including Gov. Jennifer Granholm and members of her cabinet.

I hope you will consider joining us, too. And when you've completed the challenge of eating for a week on the equivalent of a food stamp budget, I hope you'll consider a donation to the Harvest Gathering, an annual event to raise food and money to support the state's nine regional food banks that serve agencies helping people in all 83 Michigan counties.

As important as it is that we support these programs that offer immediate help to our citizens, we must also keep working on long-term solutions to end poverty.

From the governor's No Worker Left Behind initiative, which trains workers who have lost their jobs to the expansion of quality preschool opportunities for low-income children, we are tackling this issue of poverty in substantive ways.

On Nov. 13, policymakers, low-income residents and service providers from across the state will gather at Cobo Center in Detroit for the Voices for Action 2008 Poverty Summit. Together they will look for ways to ensure that as Michigan's economy recovers, our poorest citizens are not left behind.

This first-of-its-kind summit in Michigan is sponsored by the Michigan Department of Human Services, the Governor's Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity, and the Michigan Community Action Agency Association. It's not just a one-day event, but the kickoff of a statewide initiative to reduce poverty and maximize economic opportunities.

After the event, participants will continue to work together on practical solutions they can implement back home.

We are working on creating the new economic opportunity that is the only long-term answer to poverty. In the meantime, there are things we can do to ease the hardships our poorest citizens face.

So join me in taking the first step by participating in the Food Stamp Challenge. It's a challenge worth

taking on. And after you've taken the challenge, put your support into action by contributing to the Harvest Gathering.

For more information or to sign up for the challenge, please visit www.michigan.gov/poverty and click on Food Stamp Challenge. To donate to the Harvest Gathering, please visit www.feedmichigan.org.

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